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## ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the integration of Mexican-American history and culture into social studies curriculum. Teaching Mexican-American history and culture is a means of improving educational attainment among Mexican-Americans, of developing "ethnic literacy" among all students, and helping them understand their uniqueness while improving their self-esteem. It is important to select texts and other curriculum materials that accurately and realistically represent the Mexican-American experience. Many such classroom materials present information that is of superficial value or that portrays Mexican-Americans in unrealistic "hero" or "victim" roles. Aside from good curriculum materials, it is recommended that teachers and other educators have effective preservice and inservice training for teaching Mexican-American history and culture. Also important is a favorable school environment, fostered by extracurricular activities and other cultural events reflecting values of ethnic diversity. In conclusion, integrating Mexican-American history and culture into social studies is an important goal that requires effective staff development, a healthy school environment, and accurate materials that represent the diversity of the Mexican-American experience. This digest includes an exemplar bibliography. (TES)

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Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

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# Integrating Mexican-American History and Culture Into the Social Studies Classroom

by Kathy Escamilla

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**H**ISPANICS IN THE UNITED STATES are now the fastest growing and one of the least educated ethnic groups in the country (Estrada, 1988; Broun 1992), and Mexican-Americans make up 63 percent of the entire Hispanic population (Estrada, 1988). Over the past 25 years, educators have initiated many programs and policies with the hope of improving educational attainment among Mexican-Americans and other Hispanics. The purpose of this Digest is to discuss one such effort—the integration of Mexican-American history and culture into the social studies curriculum. The Digest will discuss why this effort is so important and how to overcome possible pitfalls. Successful strategies discussed in this Digest include: (1) selecting texts and other curriculum materials that accurately represent the Mexican-American experience in the U.S., (2) helping teachers to become more knowledgeable themselves, and (3) creating a school climate that values ethnic diversity.

## Reasons for Teaching Mexican-American History and Culture

Teaching such content serves multiple purposes. First, it can be important to the self-esteem of Mexican-American students. Studies suggest that positive ethnic affiliation among Mexican-Americans (and other groups) greatly influences individual development in many ways, including: lifestyle choices, values, opinions, attitudes, and approaches to learning (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990).

Yet, it is *not* enough for Mexican-American students—or any student—to learn only about their own cultural heritage and history. They must learn to appreciate and respect other cultural groups. This need leads to the second purpose of integrating Mexican-American history and culture into the social studies classroom: To develop “ethnic literacy” in *all* students. Ethnic literacy, as defined by Banks and Banks (1989), is a knowledge of the role and function that ethnicity plays in our daily lives, in our society, and in our transactions locally, regionally, and transnationally. Ethnic literacy allows all students to understand their uniqueness, to understand the complexities of ethnicity and culture, and to take pride in who they are as people.

## Selecting Texts and Curriculum Materials

There are many materials currently available to teach about Mexican-American culture and history. But, as Banks and Banks (1989) have noted, many of these materials limit their presentation of the Mexican-American experience to the discussion of isolated holidays and events. Examples include the *16 de septiembre* (Mexican Independence Day) and *5 de mayo* (an important holiday in Mexico, commemorating the victory of Mexico over the French, who were occupying Mexico in 1862).

Another pitfall of some curriculum materials in use is that they tend to present historical figures in two extremes. One extreme is the

“hero presentation,” which describes a few exceptional historical figures as superhumans, who overcame insurmountable odds to achieve greatness. More often, though, social studies curricula depict the Mexican-American people as helpless victims of poverty and discrimination, who largely reside in urban barrios or rural migrant camps.

This dichotomy of heroes and victims produces a distorted account of the Mexican-American experience in the U.S. Perpetuating stereotypes of Mexican-Americans is harmful to all students in a classroom, but poses special dangers to students of Mexican-American heritage. The view that only the exceptional succeed, while the majority fall victim—combined with sporadic and inaccurate treatment of the contributions of Mexican-Americans in the curriculum—may lead students to conclude that if they are not truly exceptional (and most of us are not), there is no hope for them, and their destined “place” is in an urban barrio or rural migrant camp. Further, students may erroneously conclude that their heritage has contributed very little to the development of the Western Hemisphere.

Failing to present a more realistic picture of Mexican-American people and their contributions leaves students with a dearth of realistic role models. Most Mexican-American students are not likely to achieve the greatness of a Caesar Chavez, nor will they likely live in a state of abject poverty. As a result, many may find it difficult to identify with the Mexican-American culture as presented in most social studies curriculum. This situation defeats one purpose of integrating Mexican-American studies into the curriculum—to develop a sense of ethnic pride.

Educators should look for curriculum materials that present a more considered view of the Mexican-American experience and history. Some excellent examples are cited in the bibliography at the end of this Digest. Such a view includes not only heroes and victims, but “regular people,” as well. Such a perspective depicts diversity. There is *not* a single Mexican-American culture, just as there is *not* a single American culture. Equally importantly, this view includes the notion that cultures change over time. Effective instructional materials include ideas related to the contemporary, as well as the historical experience, of Mexican-Americans.

## Preparing Teachers

Research suggests that teacher decisions are more important than either written curriculum or mandated texts in determining the actual content of instruction. Further, these instructional decisions often rest on teachers’ personal experiences rather than what the textbook suggests (Manley-Casimir & Wassermann, 1989). This finding is important for several reasons.

First, nationally, 25 percent of our students are nonwhite, while

only 10 percent of our teaching force is nonwhite (Broun, 1992). In urban districts, 70 percent of the student body is nonwhite, but only 30 percent of the faculty is nonwhite. Further, the population of Hispanic students, alone, is growing at two and a half times the rate of the general student population (Broun, 1992). Given these facts, many teachers probably lack the firsthand experiences and knowledge necessary to integrate readily the history and culture of Mexican-Americans into their classroom instruction (Manley-Casimir & Wassermann, 1989).

Selecting accurate and diverse instructional materials turns out to be just one of the needed steps. Another—even more important step—is to provide preservice and inservice education to help teachers, themselves, learn the history of Mexican-Americans in the U.S. For teachers to teach this subject matter effectively, they need to understand and respect the diversity of cultures in Mexican-American communities.

### Creating a School Climate that Appreciates Diversity

Student attitudes about school and their sense of self are shaped by what happens both in the classroom and throughout the school. The benefits gained by effectively incorporating Mexican-American history and culture into classroom instruction will be greatly diluted unless the school as a whole visibly appreciates not only the Mexican-American culture but also the students who represent that culture (Banks and Banks, 1989).

For example, comments such as, "I love living in the Southwest—the architecture is great, the lifestyle is wonderful," and so forth, may be common in a given school. This same school may also feature cultural activities such as folk dancing or a Spanish club, and a social studies curriculum that reflects Mexican-American contributions. Yet in this school, when teachers describe their Mexican-American students, they may also claim that students are "not competitive," "not goal oriented," or "not future-directed." Some observers describe such attitudes as valuing "lo mexicano" (Mexican things), but not "los mexicanos" (Mexican peoples) (Paz, 1987). Students can make few gains in a school environment that purports to value students' cultures but disdains students of that culture.

For these reasons, preservice and inservice training and course work should include administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals, and others in the school environment who interact with Mexican-American students.

### Conclusion

Integrating Mexican-American history and culture into the social studies classroom is a worthy and important goal for all schools. Effective integration requires that teachers have accurate materials that represent the diversity of the Mexican-American experience and the broad range of contributions made by Mexican-Americans (see suggested materials below). But, curriculum materials will have little impact without effective staff development for teachers and other educators. Further, if the goals of developing cultural pride, self-esteem, and respect for diversity are to be fully achieved, the total school environment—inside and outside the classroom—must respect diversity and display an appreciation of Mexican-American students and their heritage.

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\*Note: Due to space limitations, this bibliography is by no means exhaustive. It is meant, however, to provide examples of materials and resources that teachers may use to integrate the Mexican-American experience into social studies classrooms.

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